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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the information society introduces the academic community to the most significant revolution since the invention of the printing press. The growing use of computers can lead to a depreciation of self-worth. Since the machine can handle complex logical applications with considerably more speed and accuracy than most people, many feel frustration, intimidation, or inferiority. By applying interpersonal skills, one can cope with the potential threat to one's humanness and learn to better use computer technology as a tool, rather than becoming a slave to the technology. Computers can neither evaluate nor produce emotion, a fact that will keep man apart from the machine through at least the year 2001. Eight references are listed. (Author/LMM)

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TAKING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION OUT OF THE CLASSROOM INTO THE WORLD OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

A Paper Presented at:

Kentucky Association of Communication Arts Fall Conference

Owensboro, Kentucky

September 16, 1983

by

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AUTHOR ABSTRACT
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Author: Vernon W. Gantt

Title: Taking Interpersonal Communication out of the classroom into the world of computer technology

Abstract (up to 200 words):

The emergence of the information society introduces the academic community to the most significant revolution since the invention of the printing press. The growing use of computers can lead to a depreciation of self-worth. Since the machine can handle complex logical operations with considerably more speed and accuracy than most people, many feel frustration, intimidation, or inferiority.

By applying interpersonal skills, one can cope with the potential threat to ones humanness and learn to better use computer technology as a tool rather than becoming a slave to the technology.

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TAKING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION OUT OF THE CLASSROOM INTO THE WORLD OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

Before we examine what interpersonal communication has to do with computer technology, let me set the stage for you.

The academic community is in the midst of the most significant revolution since the invention of the printing press. The printing press made multiple copies of textbooks feasible and thereby made mass education a reality. Today, computer technology challenges the very fiber of education as we have known it and at all levels. The presence of the computer in substantial numbers in the home and work place will force educators to introduce microcomputers into the classroom at all levels of education. The presence of the computer will force us to change our whole concept of teaching and learning. This theme is skillfully developed by Seymour Papert (1980) and has been echoed by countless futurists in the past few years. Pournelle (1983) underscores my contention when he writes; "The educational potential of computers hasn't even been touched. . . .it's better that kids program computers than that the computer programs the kids. . . ." (p. 240). Benjamin Compaine (1983) says we will have to change our definition of literacy from the ability to read, write, and calculate to the ability to <u>use</u> the computer as a <u>tool.</u> It is this "new" literacy which will cause us all to tremble. The ultimate form of the trauma will confront us all when a very

normal and average youngster of seven to nine years of age begins to talk to us in computer terms we neither understand nor appreciate. In fact, some of us have already had the experience several times.

By the end of 1985, nine of ten adult jobs will involve the use of some type of computer, according to John Hayman. Some of the implications of this fact are discussed by Gantt (1983) when describing the role of the communication specialist in achieving computing literacy. While there are numerous pieces of dramatic data to point to the imminent revolution, one more bit will suffice. In the Fall of 1979 there were 400 online databases. In the Fall of 1982 there were 1133 and the estimate for Spring 1983 was 1600 (Cuadra, 1983). What does this mean? Information is a commodity to be bought and sold. Furthermore, we must all become information brokers to the degree that we know how to retrieve it and how it is stored.

If you are not angry, frustrated, intimidated, frightened, or some similar emotion by this point, I have a suggestion. Pinch yourself to see if you are alive and awake. Don't panic whatever you do because there is hope! I feel a judicious application of interpersonal communication principle will help us deal with the computer

revolution in a productive and beneficial manner.

One threat emanating from the machine is the depreciation of self worth. Since the computer can handle complex logical operation with considerable speed and accuracy, we often feel inferior. We then fall into the trap of self-fulfilling prophecy and become convinced that the machine is "smarter" than we are. Then we take the next step--avoidance. However, denial will not change the facts outlined above or forestall the inevitable.

If the above scenario does not fit, its converse probably does. We may understand how to deal with computer concepts and jargon and thus begin to think we are superior to those who do not understand. In a similar vein, we may only understand enough to be dangerous and in that case feign superiority as a self defense mechanism.

Our rescue, in either case, is to recognize that a computer can only do what some human has programmed it to do and that it is our tool. We are not really at the mercy of the computer. We are only at the mercy of those people who <u>think</u> they are at the mercy of the machine. Remember that the computer is the creation of man, not the reverse. As our tools get more and more complex, we understand ourselves better and better. Floyd Kvamme (1983), an Apple executive,

recently made three sage observations: (1) people enjoy creative work and computers are creative tools; (2) computers will improve personal productivity; and (3) computer will become more people-like in the next five years. These three observations take on some degree of power if we remember our General Semantics and do not confuse the thing with the symbol. The computer is a tool of man and not his ultimate replacement.

It is possible we may have to re-order our personal values if we are to preserve our self worth, but then, value clarification is usually a beneficial activity. Being more rational does not require the elimination of feelings but might necessitate a realignment of proportion. We can not allow rationality to replace subjectivity so we must better appreciate the balance. The computer can never improve on the beauty of oceans, mountains, wildernesses, music played by a sensitive performer, or art produced by a starving painter, potter, or sculptor. Computers do not feel; only people feel. A computer can not care or show empathy. In short, our self worth should not be diminished by a most wonderful and powerful tool which can be used to enhance our humanity rather than destroy it. In truth, only <u>we</u> have the power to destroy our humanness.

Another real danger for man is the power of fantasy. If television causes you to shudder when you think what your children or grandchildren might think is real, visit a video arcade or sit down in front of a computer and "interact" with the computer to play chess or any number of other "games." The fantasy world created by television cannot hold a candle to that generated by an Apollo "Flight Simulator." The illusion fostered by "interacting" with the computer is unequaled. The confusion of fantasy and reality could easily become a national disgrace.

However, interpersonal communication principles help us to separate fact, inference, and judgment if we will apply them and teach by example. We also must perceive what is there not what we want to be there through the process of selection. Search for what is real!

Equally troubling is our tendency to anthropomorphize when we talk about computers. We describe the computer as "talking, thinking, listening, remembering, or even having intelligence." Often the words are set off in quotation marks but too often they are not. The computer is assigned human traits and invested with human skills because it is a man-made, electronic analog of the human brain. The fact that the computer came into existence from an analogy to the

human brain is not problematic. However, using human functions to refer to the machine is dehumanizing to the highest order. It is much like advertisers using beauty and sex to sell products. We soon come to believe we should all have the degree of beauty reflected in the commercial or we are abnormal. Likewise, if we do not "think" as fast as the computer, we are slow or lacking in intelligence. Computers don't have intelligence. They only make choices from the field of possible choices they are given (programmed to choose from) and can only expand the field if they are given explicit and logical rules for expansion. However, the gravity of the problem we face is clearly illustrated in a publication of the University of Connecticut describing a computer system developed there: ". . . ACE is quite a formidable talker, always clarifying, always keeping the conversation under control. . . .(1983, p. 13)." The article clearly presents the logical processes used by ACE; but when the system's operations are illustrated, ACE is described in human terms.

The conclusion of the whole matter is this--computers can neither evaluate nor produce emotion. This fact alone will keep man apart from the machine through at least the year 2001.

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